

## **CHARACTERISTICS OF A DLA PIPER SIGNATURE PROJECT**

1. Partnership with one or more local legal service providers and/or universities.
2. Address an issue of local concern in an area of unmet need.
3. Commitment of two or more years.
4. Aspects of the project in which lawyers and paralegals from all practice groups can participate.
5. Funding a fellow to work with the project partner(s) to serve as liaison with the firm, provide training and support, and help develop the details of the chosen project.
6. Designate internal project leader who will devote up to half his or her time to the project.
7. Develop the project through an inclusive process by doing a needs assessment in the community, including a modified-RFP process from legal service providers, and ensuring that there is internal support and enthusiasm for the subject.

## **NEW YORK SIGNATURE PROJECT: ACCESS TO EDUCATION**

The New York Signature Project, which launched on October 10, 2006, focuses on improving the educational outcomes of low-income children in New York City. Attorneys in the New York office, in partnership with attorneys from Lawyers Alliance for New York (Lawyers Alliance), Advocates for Children (Advocates) and Legal Services for New York (LSNY), and with accountants from PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) will participate in direct representation and policy work that will address the needs of low-income pre-school children and school-age children in the public school system.

The project has three components, each of which will address critical issues facing New York City children: 1) transactional representation of Head Start programs in New York City; 2) direct representation of public school students in disciplinary and special education proceedings; and; 3) development of a policy element after several months of research and experience from components one and two.

### **1. *Representation of Head Start Programs***

Head Start programs provide comprehensive child development services to children from birth to age 5, pregnant women and their families. These programs are aimed at increasing the school-readiness of young children in low-income families. Head Start is administered, through grants, by the Administration for Children and Families at the Department of Health and Human Services, and all Head Start programs must adhere to Head Start Program Performance

Standards.

The transactional element of the project involves small teams of attorneys – primarily, but not exclusively, transactional and real estate attorneys – teamed with PwC accountants working with individual Head Start programs to ensure that the programs are in compliance with myriad federal and state regulations. Our representation of the Head Start programs, identified by the Lawyers Alliance as in need of legal assistance, begins by ensuring compliance with required regulations and continues thereafter as needed, in a general counsel-like capacity. PwC will assist DLA Piper attorneys in providing key compliance and governance training for selected Head Start directors, board members and administrators. Specifically, PwC will leverage its accounting expertise to provide training regarding financial statement, audit, and fraud protection recommendations. Vendor relations strategies, particularly in the food and beverage and hospitality industries, will also be a focus of PwC’s support to Head Start clients.

## 2. *Representation of New York City Public School Students*

The New York City Public School system educates over 1.1 million children, and, of these, nearly 25,000 children faced suspension of over five days in 2004-2005. A significant percentage of these children have special needs and qualify for special education and other services. Many of the children are facing suspensions for the first time and are not adequately represented – if represented at all – through the disciplinary process. We have heard numerous stories of children wrongly accused or facing disproportionate punishment who, with the help of an attorney, have been able to avoid suspension, remain in their classrooms, and stay on track academically.

The direct representation element of the project involves attorneys representing public school children in disciplinary and special education proceedings. In partnership with LSNY, we will identify a diverse set of clients, through a rigorous intake and screening process, who we believe will benefit most from our representation. We will screen out certain cases, such as students accused of weapon or drug-related infractions, which often result in more serious criminal charges. We expect our clients to be primarily younger students who are facing their first suspensions (2,280 students aged 10 and younger were suspended in 2004-2005), children who have been wrongly identified or accused of disciplinary infractions, and children in need of, but not receiving, special education services. This element of the project will present a unique opportunity for young associates to interview clients, conduct factual investigations, represent clients at disciplinary hearings and generally manage an entire matter from start to finish. We anticipate that junior associates will be supervised by a partner or senior associate, as well as work closely with experienced LSNY attorneys. In addition, through support from the DLA Piper Foundation, the firm is funding a DLA Piper Access to Education Fellow who works at LSNY and will coordinate the student representation, conduct training, and co-counsel and support attorneys on their cases.

## 3. *Policy Initiative*

The final element of the project will be the development, in collaboration with Advocates, of a policy initiative aimed at addressing key issues identified by the transactional and direct representational components. We are currently surveying the fields of education policy, school discipline and special education so that we can better understand what works and what does not work in improving educational outcomes for young school-age children. We anticipate identifying a specific policy issue within the next six to nine months. As with the representation piece, through support of the DLA Piper Foundation, a DLA Piper Access to Education Fellow is working at Advocates to coordinate our policy initiative.

We will consider the New York Signature Pro Bono Project to be a success if, after two or three years, we have been able to demonstrably improve educational outcomes for an identifiable subset of public school children in New York.

### **CHICAGO SIGNATURE PROJECT: JUVENILE JUSTICE**

For several years now, the firm has been developing significant projects by partnering with nonprofit organizations, academic institutions, foundations, and corporate clients. Our hope is to work together to develop innovative solutions to vexing social problems and to help the most vulnerable members of our society. Our adoption and special education signature projects in Washington, DC, and the domestic violence program in Tampa are examples of such undertakings.

In summer 2004, the Chicago office launched a unique, large-scale pro bono initiative in the area of juvenile justice. The firm's Chicago attorneys and U.S. Pro Bono Partner Lisa Dewey conducted a seven-month search for potential initiative partners. The firm chose to partner with Northwestern University's Bluhm Legal Clinic to design and implement the new pro bono project. With Bluhm's assistance, DLA Piper designed a two-pronged project, committing over 7,500 attorney hours to represent young people in juvenile court and to work on a study of juvenile justice policies affecting children and families in Chicago. The project's design included hiring a full-time Fellow at Bluhm to act as an attorney and clinical teacher with the University and who would be devoted to working on the initiative with the firm. In addition, during the first year of the project, an associate devoted half of her time to project administration. During the second and third years, the oversight has expanded to project heads for each prong, as well as a partner who oversees the entire initiative.

The first prong of the project concerns large-scale policy reform. The policy team is using a collaborative, solutions-based approach to certain issues arising from the relationship between the juvenile justice system and the Chicago Public Schools (CPS). This past year, three internal policy teams have examined different aspects of the relationship between the CPS's policies and the Cook County juvenile justice system (CCJJ). The next phase of the policy project gathered information through the interview process with the various stakeholders involved in the CPS—

CCJJ paradigm. The policy team has focused its efforts on the issue: “From the Juvenile Justice System Back to the Classroom” developing a policy piece that will address how society can best return to the classroom children who have been referred to the juvenile justice system or expelled from school.

The second prong of the project involves direct representation of juveniles in the justice system. During the last year, firm attorneys have confronted some of the cutting-edge issues in the juvenile justice arena while representing over 61 juveniles in over 785 separate cases. Juvenile justice issues encountered have included sentencing based on court findings, DNA sampling of minors, reports of police and detention authority misconduct, and recent statutory provisions calling for imposition of adult sentences on top of juvenile sentences under certain circumstances.

Many clients have already experienced disappointments and trauma at a very young age. Often, they face gang-related issues both in school and at home. This can make representation difficult. Students pursuing master degrees in social work supervised by Bluhm’s social worker are assigned to many of the cases the firm accepts in order to address psycho-social needs of clients. Having a social worker on the team provides a strong base for the firm’s advocacy both in and out of the courtroom, allowing clients access to help and resources for anything from attending school, getting tutoring, or receiving drug treatment.

In recognition of this project, the Chicago office received the Illinois State Bar Association’s 2004-2005 John C. McAndrews Pro Bono Service Award. The prestigious honor, given by the ISBA Standing Committee on Delivery of Legal Services, recognizes lawyers’ meritorious effort in delivering pro bono legal services.